

# Threat, Politics, and Attitudes: Toward a Greater Understanding of Rally-'Round-the-Flag Effects

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## Abstract

Social scientists have long known that threatening situations can have a powerful effect on sociopolitical attitudes. One of the more dramatic examples of this phenomenon is the “rally 'round the flag effect,” characterized by dramatic spikes in popularity of the American president. Previous models of rally effects have strongly emphasized the role of anxiety and the desire for security as explanations for these changes in support. In this article, we present a contrasting view, showing support for an anger-based conceptualization that builds upon earlier research on emotional appraisal. We discuss the relevance of our findings for theory and research across a variety of different paradigms in the social psychological and political science literature.

## Keywords

rally effects, attitudes, emotion

Within days of the attacks of September 11, 2001, storefronts throughout the United States were covered with slogans like “America the Beautiful” and “United We Stand.” People bought American flags in droves and displayed them proudly on their cars and in front of their houses. Such displays of patriotism also seemed to bring together—temporarily, at least—Democrats and Republicans in an apparent show of unity, as more than 100 representatives from both parties stood together at the steps of the Capitol Building to sing “God Bless America.” Equally notable is the effect that this event had on the popularity of President George W. Bush, who saw his approval ratings soar nearly 40 points in a matter of a few days, to 90%. This represents the highest approval rating ever recorded for an American president, besting the previous record of 89 percent, held by Bush’s father just after the commencement of the Gulf War in 1991.

## Rally-'Round-the-Flag Effects

Beginning in the early 1930s, pollsters have regularly tracked the popularity of the American president with the now-familiar “job approval rating.” For the most part, changes in presidential approval tend to be relatively modest in scope, but the aforementioned spike in popularity enjoyed by George Bush represents a dramatic exception to this rule. Such effects—often referred to as rally-'round-the-flag effects—are not common, but they have been extensively documented by political scientists when they do, in fact, occur. Early models (Mueller, 1970) suggested that *any* sudden international crisis

could trigger sustained boosts in presidential popularity. However, a recent review (Baker & O’Neal, 2001) suggests that an emerging *military* crisis—especially if it is sudden, dramatic, and international in scope—is one of the few factors sufficient, in and of itself, to trigger sustained increases in support for the president. In line with this view, there are only a handful of well-documented rally effects aside from those following the attacks of 9/11, and all of these fit the criteria laid out by Baker and O’Neal, including the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Bay of Pigs crisis in 1962, the aforementioned entry of the United States into the Gulf War in 1991, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

## What Causes Rally Effects?

Several different explanations for rally effects have been offered. The “opinion leadership” view suggests that rally effects are due to a temporary reduction in open criticism of the president that, in turn, leads the “public to assume that there is a consensus among political leaders . . . and to [thus] support the president, even if they would otherwise be inclined to oppose him” (Baker & O’Neal, 2001, p. 668). An alternative “patriotism” perspective draws from basic principles of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which

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generally assumes that people are motivated to maintain a positive view of the groups to which they belong, especially during intergroup conflict. SIT suggests that an attack against the United States should bolster support for the president, as well as for symbolic representations of the ingroup (e.g., the flag). These models provided a useful starting point for our investigation, but they offered no specific predictions regarding the dynamics that might be responsible for eliciting rally effects in the first place. Several psychological models of threat, which we will discuss, provided a more specific set of testable predictions.

### Security-Based Models of Threat in the Social Psychological Literature

Although they are not theories of rally effects per se, several social psychological models offer a way of understanding the basic nature and cause of rally effects. These include terror-management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997), motivated-social-cognition theory (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), uncertainty-management theory (Van den Bos, Poortvliet, Maas, Miedema, & Van den Ham, 2005), and anxiety-based formulations of authoritarianism (Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991). Despite some important differences between these models, each emphasizes the idea that people are motivated to see the world as a secure/predictable place, and all suggest that a salient threat—such as the 9/11 attacks—should lead people to affiliate themselves with the American president and with other cultural institutions that offer an actual and/or symbolic sense of security and safety.

Although they seem to offer an appealing perspective on rally effects, such security-based explanations are less compelling than they might seem at first. For one thing, if the need for security is the driving force behind rally effects, one should expect a boost in support for the president in *any* context that triggers anxiety among the general public. As noted earlier, however, rally effects appear to only occur in the context of a militaristic/hostile context, not simply those that produce anxiety. Furthermore, research on emotional appraisal (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small, & Fischhoff, 2003; Sadler, Lineberger, Correll, & Park, 2005; Skitka, Bauman, Aramovich, & Morgan, 2006; see also Schwarz, 1990) suggests that anxiety would elicit a general *reluctance* to support the kinds of risky, militaristically aggressive decisions that are precisely the sorts of actions taken by presidents in times of military crises. Moreover, this research shows that anger (but not anxiety) tends to be positively associated with pro-militaristic, “hawkish” policies of the government (e.g., decisions to launch military strikes). This research has tended to focus on policy preference rather than presidential approval per se, but such policies are precisely the sorts of decisions made by wartime presidents, and thus this research has obvious relevance to the psychological dynamics of rally effects.

### An Alternative Anger-Based Framework

This state of affairs led us to consider an alternative model, which, building on the aforementioned emotional-appraisal research, places greater emphasis on anger and aggression. Although there are many different antecedents of aggression, Bushman and Anderson (2002) suggest that “perhaps the single most important cause of human aggression is interpersonal provocation” (p. 37) in the form of insults or physical aggression. It is not difficult to see how this literature might be useful for understanding the dynamics of rally effects. For one thing, provocation does not occur only at an interpersonal level: Large groups (such as countries) can be the target of attacks as well, and the attacks of 9/11 obviously represent one example. As such, attacks against the ingroup can certainly instigate anger, which might facilitate aggressive action tendencies. Given the global nature of such attacks, individual citizens may reflexively turn to the American president—the symbolic and literal commander in chief—as a way of addressing concomitant motives of retaliation and retribution.

The relevance of the aggression literature to rally effects might seem somewhat obvious in retrospect. Note, however, that this conceptualization stands in stark contrast to the dominant orientation of most social psychological models of threat, which, as we have seen, emphasize motives of security and safety and centrally implicate anxiety as a determinant of upward shifts in presidential approval. Our model offers several testable predictions that are different from those made by these security-based models of threat. For one thing, we predict that anger, not anxiety, should mediate the emergence of rally effects. Second, our model stipulates that rally effects reflect—at their core—increased appeal for the president with respect to his role as *military* commander in chief. As such, we predict that rally effects should *not* involve changes in attitudes toward the president that are unrelated to matters of military policies.

### Supportive Empirical Evidence

As noted above, the emotional-appraisal literature provides support for an anger-based framework, but most of this evidence, to date, has been correlational. Between 2003 and 2008, we generated experimentally based, causal support for our framework across four different investigations (Lambert et al., 2010; see also Lambert, Scherer, Rogers, & Jacoby, 2009). Our sample consisted of (mostly liberal) college students, although, as we discuss ahead, the ideological slant of our sample provided us with an opportunity to test some provocative aspects of our framework.

One of our approaches relied on a “reminding” paradigm, in which participants were randomly assigned to conditions in which they either were or were not asked to watch a short video clip of the 9/11 attacks. Immediately after this manipulation, we assessed participants’ emotional state, and this was

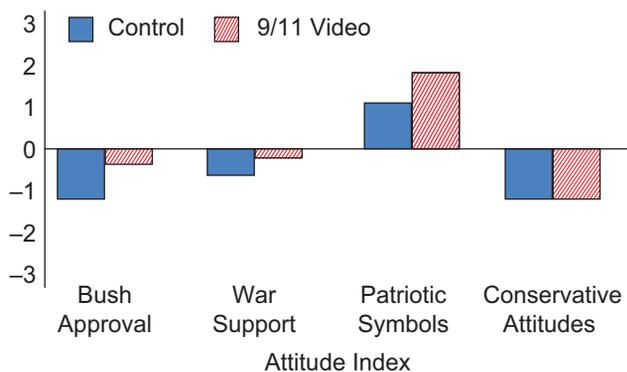
then followed by an extensive battery of attitudinal questions. These questions assessed support for the president, attitudes toward the Iraq war, feelings toward national symbols, and attitudes toward a variety of political issues. Principal-components analyses were used to generate a smaller number of theoretically meaningful indices, including one pertaining to general support for then-president George W. Bush (Bush Approval); another pertaining to support for the Iraq war (War Support); a third capturing attitudes toward patriotic symbols, such as the flag and statue of liberty (Patriotic Symbols); and a fourth index capturing attitudes toward a variety of political issues (e.g., gay rights, abortion), coded such that higher numbers indicated more pro-conservative views (Conservative Attitudes).

### Impact of reminders on attitudes

Figure 1 displays the mean level of attitudes for each of the indices as a function of experimental condition. Compared to those assigned to the control condition, participants reminded of the 9/11 attacks expressed not only significantly more favorable attitudes toward President Bush but also greater support for the Iraq war, along with more positive reactions toward symbolic representations of the United States. However, our manipulation had no effect whatsoever on the conservative attitude index, which, as seen in the figure, elicited negative reactions regardless of our manipulation.

### Did pre-existing ideology moderate the impact of our manipulation?

Although our experimental manipulation had no effect on political opinions, a distinct question is whether our manipulation had similar or different effects depending on participants' pre-existing political views. We were able to address this issue on the basis of participants' previous (i.e., "pre-test") responses to the Right Wing Authoritarian scale (RWA; Altemeyer, 1988), which was administered at the beginning of the



**Fig. 1.** Favorableness of attitude with respect to the four attitude indices as a function of whether participants were or were not reminded of the 9/11 attacks via a short video clip. The video in question did not contain any "political" content (e.g., contained no direct or indirect reference to the president).

experimental session. The RWA scale contains a series of 32 statements (e.g., "God's laws about abortion, pornography, and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished") to which respondents were directed to express their relative agreement or disagreement. According to most scholars, authoritarianism represents one important facet of political ideology and tends to correlate strongly with most measures of conservatism (although RWA is not synonymous with general political conservatism; cf. Christie, 1991). The majority of our participants scored rather low on this measure, indicating that most of them walked into our laboratory with liberal, rather than conservative, views. In other contexts, this feature of our sample might be considered a liability. In our case, however, it allowed us to test whether our pattern of results would hold for the most extreme "super liberal" of our participants, who walked into our experiment holding exceptionally negative views toward Bush and the ongoing war in Iraq.

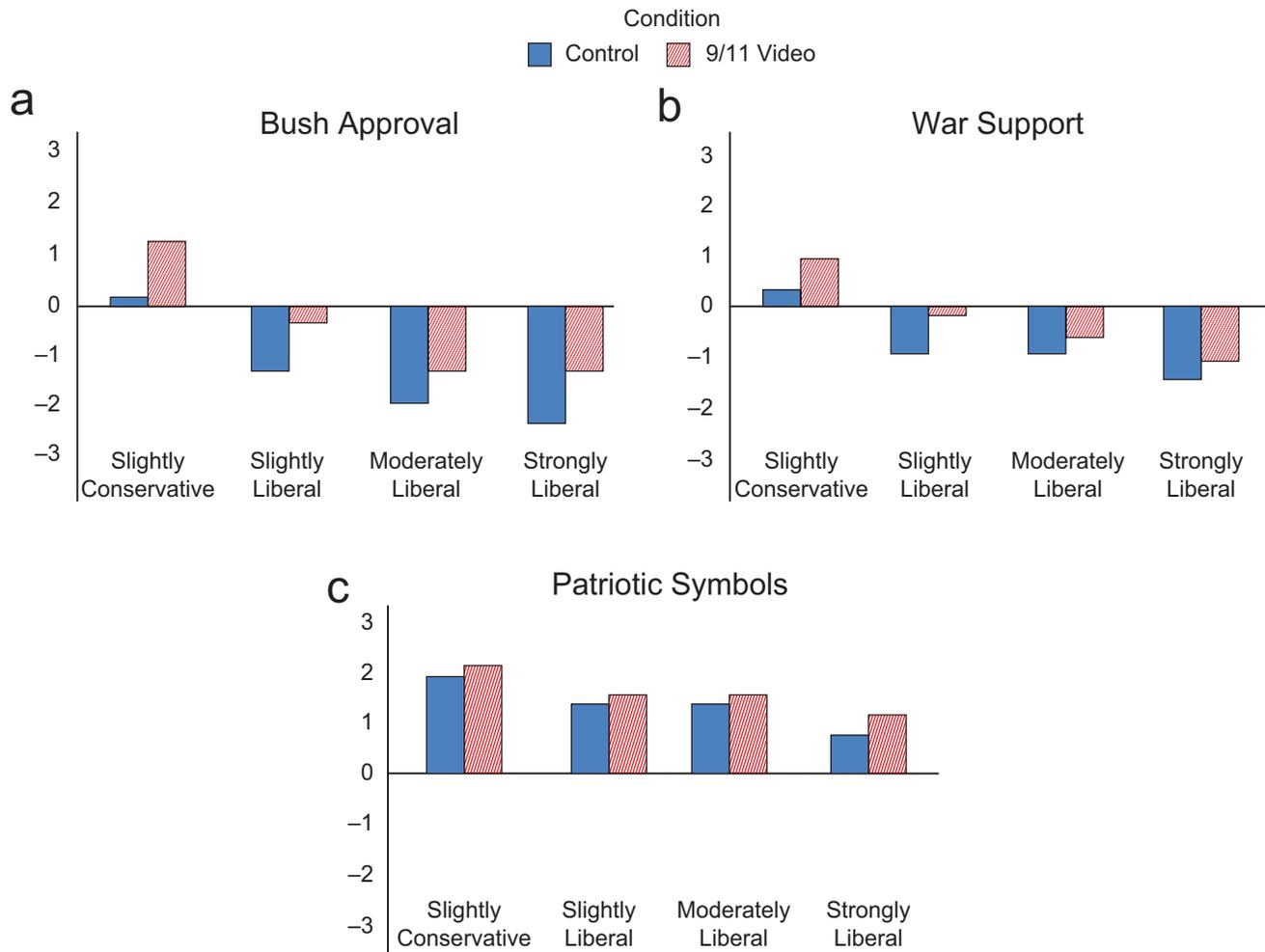
The role of RWA as a moderator was assessed formally using multiple regression (which retained the continuous nature of this variable), but the implication of these analyses can be seen more clearly in Figures 2a to 2c, which show the pattern of results broken down by a quartile split. As can be seen, our manipulation clearly had an independent effect apart from pre-existing ideology, the latter of which clearly had an impact in its own right.

### Mediational analyses

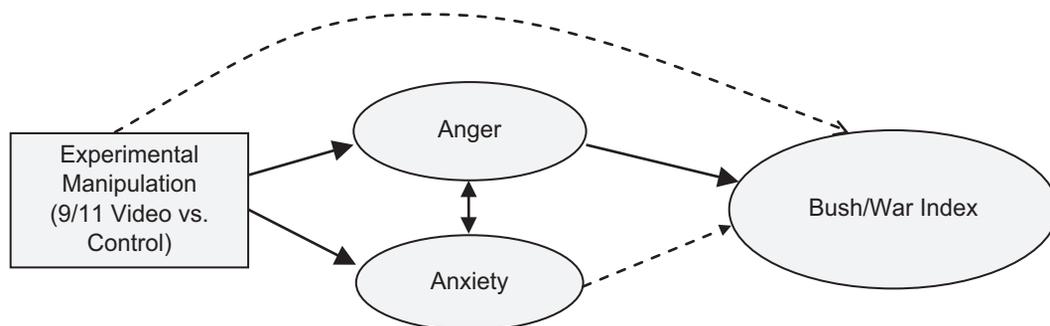
Reminders of the 9/11 attacks clearly affected attitudes as a whole (Fig. 1) and did so independently of pre-existing differences in ideology (Figs. 2a–2c). To what extent did these effects involve emotional reaction to the video? Mediational analyses clearly revealed more support for the role of anger, compared to anxiety, and this was especially true of the Bush Approval and War Support indices, as shown in Figure 3. As seen in that figure, the experimental manipulation clearly elicited strong feelings of anger and anxiety, yet it was only the former, not the latter, that was responsible for changes in attitude.

### Validation of our model using other experimental paradigms

In addition to the approach described above, we have used a variety of other measures and experimental paradigms. One variation involved having participants provide an autobiographical account of their experiences of the 9/11 attacks (vs. a control condition, in which participants merely provided an account of their typical day). This manipulation closely replicated the findings reported above, as did an experimental induction of anger, which was unconnected to politics. Finally, we have found that induction of anger, but not anxiety, triggers greater support for hypothetical "hawkish" politicians espousing militarily aggressive positions regarding the war in Iraq.



**Fig. 2.** Positive and negative attitude ratings as a function of experimental manipulation (control vs. 9/11 video) and pre-existing differences in political ideology, as determined by participants' response to a premeasure of the Right Wing Authoritarian (RWA) scale, administered at the beginning of the experimental session.



**Fig. 3.** Observed relation between experimental manipulation, anger versus anxiety, and a composite measure of attitudinal preference based on an average of participants' approval of then-president Bush and their support for the Iraq war. Solid black arrows represent significant positive relations between the relevant variables; dotted lines represent weak/nonsignificant relations.

### Beyond 9/11: Implications and Future Directions

Rally effects provide a dramatic example of the “power of the situation” (Allport, 1935) involving near-simultaneous

shifts in opinions among literally millions of people. Although additional research is obviously needed, our work offers additional insight into this phenomenon. For example, the independent effects of our 9/11 reminder, over and above political ideology, suggests why rally effects would be so widespread

across the general population. (This aspect of our results is somewhat more consistent with the theoretical assumptions of the motivated-social-cognition model than with terror-management theory; see Lambert et al., 2010, for a relevant discussion). Also, as noted earlier, our findings are generally incompatible with several “security based” models of threat in the social psychological literature but, in contrast, builds upon important work in the emotional-appraisal area (Huddy et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2003; Skitka et al., 2006).

The central role of anger also highlights a provocative implication of our model: Other things being equal, *positive* events (e.g., military victories/accomplishments) may be less likely to trigger rally effects than *negative* events (e.g., terrorist attacks), to the extent that the former class of events are less likely to involve the activation of anger. This could potentially explain, in part, why the capture and killing of Osama Bin Laden in early May 2011 produced a surprisingly small, and relatively short-lived, boost in support for Barack Obama, although other factors could certainly have been responsible for these relatively small effects. Our current work is seeking answers to these and other complexities regarding the interactive effects of cognition and emotion on public opinion and various aspects of behavior, including their relative support for “hawks” versus “doves” in future national elections.

### Recommended Reading

- Huddy, L., & Feldman, S. (2011). Americans respond politically to 9/11: Understanding the impact of the terrorist attacks and their aftermath. *American Psychologist*, *66*, 455–467. An extremely thorough and up-to-date review of a wide diversity of research that has addressed the consequences of psychological threat for political attitudes.
- Kosloff, S., Greenberg, J., Weise, D., & Solomon, S. (2010). The effects of mortality salience on political preferences: The roles of charisma and political orientation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *46*, 139–145. Provides a good overview of terror-management theory, with special emphasis on the relevance of this model to contextual shifts in political attitudes.
- Ladd, J.M. (2007). Predispositions and public support for the president during the war on terrorism. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *71*, 511–538. A recent consideration of the dynamics driving presidential attitudes in the context of terrorist-based threat.

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### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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